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Gender, Shame, and the Pantsuit

By Mary Edwards

Shame and Visibility

Shame is widely regarded as an awful feeling. It is usually characterized as an involuntary, negative, other-mediated emotion about oneself, and differentiated from other uncomfortable self-conscious emotions such as embarrassment by virtue of the fact that it involves a “negative global assessment” of oneself (Manion 2003, 2). I may feel *embarrassment* if, for example, I discover that I have been walking around a public space with a trail of toilet-paper attached to my shoe; I will feel silly, self-conscious, and possibly a corresponding desire to hide from the view of others, but this experience is not shameful because it does not prompt me to reassess my overall self-worth. Shame emerges from an appreciation of why another would perceive one as inferior or lowly, not merely ridiculous. It has a moral dimension, distinct from that associated with guilt, because it is concerned with the status of *the self*. The subject of guilt is conscious of how she may have harmed others, whereas the subject of shame is aware that her personal failings may be visible. Hence, the student caught cheating in an exam may undergo the shameful realization that others have now *seen* her bad traits (laziness, willingness to cheat, etc.).

Feminist scholars have, however, criticized traditional characterizations of shame as a discrete, punitive, emotional episode in a subject’s history, such as that experienced by the student above, for failing to appreciate how it is possible to feel ashamed of what one *is*, as well as about what one *does*. The supposedly “universal” subject considered by traditional accounts of shame appears to be a socially privileged “male subject in disguise” (Bartky 1990, 84), who is accustomed to being “(in)visible”.

Following Luna Dolezal, I take “(in)visibility” to designate the state that people generally strive to achieve in their social relations; that of being “visible” as a “full co-subjectivity”, while also being “unremarkable . . . not judged or objectified” (2015, 81). Although socially privileged men are by no means immune to the experience of painful visibility we call shame, they do, seemingly, get to experience shame as a switch *from* (in)visibility to visibility. The situation is different for oppressed persons, who may only rarely experience the comfort of (in)visibility, and instead fluctuate between feeling painfully visible and feeling “invisible”, i.e. “seen, but then *seen through*”, in the company of others (Dolezal 2015, 88). Oppressed persons, therefore, may also experience the chronic shame concomitant with the belief that one is not the “right” kind of person in the eyes of others.

If we accept that women’s shame-proneness is an important component of their continued oppression, then we can expect there to be some triggers of shame that are peculiar to women’s experience. One reason why women appear to be particularly shame-prone is because the feminine body, as Joanne Entwistle suggests, “is always, potentially at least, a sexual body” (2000, 38), which means that women are liable to become *visible* as sexual beings regardless, and often in spite, of their intentions. This strongly suggests that clothing could be an important trigger of shame for women, as it can fail them in ways it cannot fail men.<1> Although persons of all genders are likely to experience deep embarrassment if the seam at the back of their trousers bursts as they bend over before others, the aim of this musing is to show that women can also experience clothing as a source of shame for reasons that are peculiar to their gender. Women are, for instance, quite likely to experience revelations that they look “frumpy”, “manly”, or “tarty” in a certain outfit as shameful. What each of these states has in common is their relation to normative expectations regarding the management of

women's bodies *qua* sexual bodies. A woman's realization that she appears frumpy or manly in a certain outfit can trigger shame – not merely embarrassment – because it signals not only an aesthetic shortcoming but also a personal failure to present oneself as a “proper” – i.e. socially sanctioned – woman, since women in our society are praised for embodying the opposite traits; daintiness and femininity. Appearing tarty is often considered a moral failing for women, as the “loose” woman is presumed to lack self-respect and to – indiscriminately – invite sexual advances. Thus, a woman who realizes that she looks frumpy, manly, or tarty, realizes that her clothes have *exposed her* as contemptible.

Despite being acknowledged as contributing to the specific – and, arguably, more pervasive (Bartky 1990) – character of shame in women's experience, women's dress is still relatively under critiqued as a source of shame. Although, initially, clothing might seem to lie at the trivial end of the spectrum of potential triggers for women's shame, as feminists, we ought to be wary of the received idea that concerns about women's attire are trivial, especially as even a cursory glance at the role of women's clothing in our society supplies evidence to the contrary. We live in a world in which women's careers can be tarnished, destroyed, and – occasionally – made, as a consequence of “wardrobe malfunctions”, and media coverage of what our female politicians do and say is frequently eclipsed by analyses of what they wear. This state of affairs gives rise to the following question: Why do women's clothed bodies appear to be much more visible than men's? Though, it would be impossible to provide a satisfactory, or even adequate, response to this question here, I aim to gesture towards a response which suggests that women's clothed bodies are not, in themselves, more visible than men's, but that women's clothes are frequently taken to make something politically significant about them visible, in a way that men's are not.<2> In order to make such a gesture, I shall

focus on the trouser-suit; first of all because, in the wake of the Pantsuit Nation,<3> this outfit calls for more critical attention. Secondly, because I have a strong suspicion that one reason why many professional women have embraced the trouser-suit is because it might have the potential to limit the meanings that may be read into women's bodies; meanings that can distract others from attending to the meanings women actually want to make, and which often represent a source of shame for women.

Power-Dressing and the Pantsuit

Professional and business work places have traditionally been male domains, and they are also spaces where sexuality is generally deemed inappropriate (with the obvious exception of the sex industry). Thus, dressing for work presents women – whose bodies are routinely sexualized in western culture – with a serious challenge; they must “‘manage’ or at least limit the potential sexuality of their bodies” (Entwistle 2000, 32).

“Power-dressing”, a trend that began in late 1970s in the United States, advertised itself as a solution to precisely this challenge. It differs from its male counterpart – “dressing for success” – in its acknowledgement of women's sexuality as a “major obstacle” to their career progression (Entwistle 2000, 188). Power-dressing manuals promise to offer the career woman a means of taking some control over her body and its social meanings. They attempt to guide women on how to avoid a plethora of potentially career-damaging wardrobe errors, which include: wearing clothes that are provocative, which makes women workers *visible* as sex objects; dressing in a manner that is too feminine and, therefore, unprofessional, which renders women *invisible* in the workplace; and appearing too masculine, which supposedly makes women appear threatening in the eyes of their male colleagues. Power-dressing manuals almost unanimously recommended the skirted-suit for the career woman, as a

costume that protects her from seeming shamefully out of place in the workplace by sending the *right* message: “I am a business woman, not an imitation man; but while we are working please treat me simply as a colleague” (Kidwell and Steele 1989, 87).

While the skirted-suit remains a popular choice for professional women, the trouser-suit, or “pantsuit” in common parlance, has enjoyed a revival in recent years. Though once a popular choice for working women in the early 1970s, the pantsuit fell out of favor because “many women found that colleagues and clients still regarded trousers as masculine”, and women wearing trouser-suits to work were deemed to be taking a “risk” if they were doing business with men (Kidwell and Steele 1989, 87). Might the return of the pantsuit signal a shift in how the feminine body is constituted in relation to structures of shame? The growing preference for pantsuits among professional women can be viewed as a result of the progress made toward greater gender equality in the professional sphere in the last couple of decades, which has reduced the amount of pressure placed upon women to kowtow to the needs of their male colleagues, at the expense of their own comfort and convenience. Indeed, the patriarchal prohibition on women wearing pantsuits³ may be a factor in their renewed appeal. By protecting women from the kinds of shame that more traditional women’s clothing could still subject them to in the workplace – that of being *visible*, e.g. as a sex object, on the one hand, or being regarded as frivolous/unprofessional and thus *invisible* on the other – and by also representing a refusal to prioritize the needs of male colleagues above their own, in a way that the skirted-suit does not, the pantsuit holds the promise of bodily (in)visibility for women in the workplace today. It could – potentially – render their bodies neutral, unremarkable, and (in)visible, like men’s. However, there is a possibility that the pantsuit is booby-trapped and that, rather than

providing women with a means of achieving (in)visibility, it exposes them to another species of shameful visibility.

The Covert Function of the Suit

In a well known essay, “The Suit and the photograph”, John Berger explores the symbolic function of the suit by analyzing three photographs of suited men taken by August Sander: one of three peasant men walking to a dance in 1914; a group portrait of an all male village band, taken in 1913; and another of four Protestant missionaries in 1931. Berger observes that even if one covers the faces of the men in the first two photographs and surveys only their clothed bodies, the notion that *these* bodies could belong to members of the ruling or the middle class appears preposterous. One might presume that the social class of these men would not be discernable from an examination of their clothed bodies, but the suits of these men emphasize their class rather than disguising it, or even elevating them above it. Berger contends that the suits in these photographs lend an absurdity to the bodies they adorn, making them seem “coarse, clumsy, brute-like” (1991 [1980], 427). The tailored clothes of the four missionaries, however, appear to enhance their physical dignity, rather than diminish it.

In his attempt to explain how the function of the suit could vary in accordance with the class of its wearer, Berger reminds us that it was originally developed as a ruling class uniform that idealized “purely *sedentary* power” (Berger 1991, 430). While its original function may have been to dissolve differences between members of the upper class, once persons from outside the ruling elite adopted it as their uniform too, its function evolved, in Berger’s view. Its original and overt function remained intact, but it developed another, covert function: class hegemony. By wearing suits, working class men permitted others to judge them by the ruling class’s standards “of chic and

sartorial worthiness”, which “condemned them . . . to being always, and recognizably to the classes above them, second-rate, clumsy, uncouth, defensive” (Berger 1991, 431). Therefore, working class men’s adoption of the suit – a costume ill-suited to both their physique and their everyday activities – made them visible as imposters. If Berger’s analysis is correct, it sheds some light on the question of why the trouser-suit may not assist everyone in the struggle for (in)visibility.

Although, women have fought for their right to wear the pantsuit, one only has to look to the recent media treatment of Hilary Clinton to see that this outfit may not secure bodily (in)visibility for women. Clinton was the first First Lady to wear trousers in an official White House portrait (Lerman-Golomb 2016), and her continued commitment to the pantsuit has been celebrated. And, though unsuccessful in her plight to become the first female leader of the United States, she was heralded as the leader of the “Pantsuit Nation”. Nevertheless, throughout her presidential campaign, Clinton’s clothed body was often deemed more noteworthy than what she had to say. Moreover, her decision to continually wear pantsuits seems to have made it easier for her opponents to shame her as an unfeminine, cold-hearted, “nasty woman” (Woolf 2016).

In light of Berger’s exposition of the suit as a class-marker, one cannot help but wonder whether women have fallen into the same trap as working class men in their attempt to mimic patriarchal dress. By embracing the pantsuit, have women succumbed to sexual class hegemony? To respond to this question, we need be clearer about who and what determines the function of the pantsuit.

Recovering Our Pantsuits?

As shame is an other-mediated emotion, it will be contended that if the pantsuit fails to render women’s bodies (in)visible, then this is primarily because women ritually shame

other women on account of what they wear. But this is of little consequence since it has been shown that part of the functioning of modern patriarchal power is that it allows men to “get off scot-free” (Bartky 1990, 80); because women have internalized the male gaze, they can assume the role of oppressors and oppressed simultaneously. Thus, the fact that it tends to be women who are most critical of other women’s clothes does not disprove the idea that the norms and expectations surrounding women’s dress contribute to women’s specific shame-proneness and play a significant role in their continued oppression.

In her investigation into how women’s (male) self-surveillance affects their relationship with clothes, Iris Marion Young seeks to determine whether or not there is a way of extracting the male gaze from the equation. Drawing upon the Irigarayan insight that when women get together to select, shop for, and share clothes, they “might speak different relationships” (2005, 68), Young recommends touch, female bonding, and fantasy as potential avenues for women who strive to read their own meanings into their clothes. Yet, she concludes that it may be impossible “to extricate the liberating and valuable in women’s experience of clothes from the exploitative and oppressive” (Young 2005, 74). Indeed, it seems as though any resulting gains in pleasure and confidence achieved by a woman who takes up Young’s advice are likely to be lost as soon as she steps out of the society of her sisters, into the world of patriarchal norms and values, where her clothed body is always a potential source of shame because it is the patriarchal Other, not she, who has most control over its meanings.

What is interesting about the pantsuit though is that it is an outfit that has not, historically, met with approval under the male gaze. It has even been suggested that the fact that trouser-suits are simply called “suits” when worn by men, but “(pant)suits” when worn by women, indicates that many people in our society are still uncomfortable

with women wearing trousers (Lerman-Golomb 2016). There may be something in this. If the prefix “pant” is taken to define her suit in relation to his, then the pantsuit-clad woman appears to be a deviation from the norm. Understanding the pantsuit as the “female equivalent” of *the* (male) suit requires the acceptance of a system of capitalist, patriarchal norms, within which the covert function of the suit (social/sexual class hegemony) remains in play. However, if the pantsuit is understood as a female costume whose overt function is the transgression of patriarchal norms, then the covert function of the suit is deactivated, as the pantsuit first of all symbolizes the rejection of a system of values that would mark women (and working class men) in suits as imposters. Under the latter interpretation, it would seem that, even if the pantsuit cannot (yet) guarantee bodily (in)visibility for women, it does offer them the rare opportunity to make their own meanings through clothing because it defies interpretation under the male gaze.

Although, currently, both the above interpretations of the pantsuit coexist, a deeper understanding of the transgressive potential of the pantsuit will, hopefully, allow women to wear this outfit on their own terms, if they choose to wear it.

Notes

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1. The term “men” is used throughout as shorthand for socially privileged men in our society (i.e. typically white, educated, heterosexual, etc., males). However, it has been well documented how the bodies of other marginalized persons, including males, can be sexualized in analogous ways to those of women. So, while this discussion is limited to women’s experience of their clothed bodies, it may also be relevant to members of other marginalized groups of any gender.
2. This seems to be a characteristic of women’s clothes that tabloid editors are willing to exploit, since speculations about what a female politician’s “daring” display of décolletage means will, unfortunately, sell more papers than a review of her policy on mental health.
3. The Pantsuit Nation refers to a Facebook group, established in October 2016 by a private citizen of Maine to encourage thirty friends to wear Hilary Clinton’s trademark pantsuits to polling stations in demonstration of support for the first female presidential candidate. The group quickly grew to include over 2.9 million members by the time of the November 2016 election. Both the Facebook group and the Twitter hashtag continue to function as a source of camaraderie among Clinton supporters and gender equality activists.
4. Notably, women were forbidden from wearing trousers on the floor of the US Senate until 1993 (Lerman-Golomb 2016).

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